

THE MEDIUM AS A CONTEXTUAL CUE

Effects of Creative Media Choice

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ABSTRACT: This paper adds to the research on media-context effects with a study of creative media choice (i.e., creatively choosing a medium to implicitly communicate the message). In an experiment, ads were placed in a creative media choice setting and compared with identical ads in a traditional medium. Employing theories on media-source effects and on cognitive priming and assimilation, it is hypothesized that the creative media choice enhances the perception of target brand associations and increases ad credibility and ad and brand attitudes. The results support the hypotheses. The effects of creative media choice are moderated by congruence, and additional analyses suggest that they may be mediated by surprise.

"The medium is the message." This expression was coined in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan, who suggested that the medium creates imagery and awareness of the advertised brand. Since then, numerous studies have proven the importance of the media context. Researchers have found, for example, that media context affects ad recall (e.g., De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert 2002), ad recognition (e.g., Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002), level and nature of ad processing (e.g., Shapiro, MacInnis, and Park 2002), ad attitude and ad cognitions (e.g., Coulter 1998), brand attitude (e.g., Lord, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2001), and purchase intention (e.g., Yi 1990a).

However, with the exception of Yi's (1990a, 1990b, 1993) studies of cognitive-priming effects, most researchers have focused on context-induced involvement or arousal, or context-induced mood or affect (for a review, see De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert 2002; Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002). In these cases, the media context facilitates or inhibits consumers' perceptions of the ad's message rather than actually communicating the message. Furthermore, with the exception of the study by Moorman, Neijens, and Smit (2002) of the thematic congruence between ads and magazine titles, virtually all studies have focused on the immediate editorial context, such as articles or television shows or segments, rather than on the total media context.

But what about when the medium itself *is* the message? The purpose of the present study is to investigate effects of creative media choice. A creative media choice means that the brand logo and slogan are exposed and the brand associa-

tions are implicitly communicated through the medium by way of priming and assimilation. As noted by Yi (1990a), the media context is not merely a benign background for ads; it can also become an effective form of communication in itself. Nowadays, we find advertising in creative, new settings, such as on banana peels, trash cans, and paper coffee cups (Karo 2002). Several researchers have called for research concerning creative media choice, observing that the advertising medium may be just as effective and possibly more cost-efficient as a positioning tool than the product's design or entire promotional campaign (e.g., Maher and Hu 2002; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002; Schmitt 1994).

Creative media choice, where the medium itself implicitly communicates the message, has a number of potential advantages compared with traditional ads. First, the ad context is more likely to be processed intentionally rather than incidentally, as is the case with traditional ads (Lord, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2001). We would therefore expect a greater perception of brand associations when the message is communicated by the medium instead of the ad. In addition, a creative media choice increases the distinctiveness of the source (as compared with, e.g., newspapers that have numerous different advertisers), which enhances the transfer of associations from the medium to the brand (Sparkman and Locander 1980). Moreover, an indirect approach (i.e., when the message is not explicitly communicated in the ad, but rather primed by the ad context) can generate fewer unfavorable cognitive responses than a direct approach (Yi 1990b). We would therefore expect greater ad credibility and a more favorable ad attitude when consumers have to draw their own conclusions. Finally, focusing on the total media context (as opposed to the immediate editorial context) may have more practical relevance for

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advertisers because of the greater control and predictability it offers (Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002). Based on these notions, this paper presents a study testing the effects of creative media choice on brand associations, ad credibility, and ad and brand attitudes.

MEDIA SOURCE AND PRIMING EFFECTS IN ADVERTISING

The media source affects consumers' perceptions of the ad in several ways. First, a media context that is similar to the ad in mood or affect enhances learning and evaluations of the ad and its message (see, e.g., Coulter 1998; De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert 2002; Kamins 1991; Lord, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2001). Goldberg and Gorn (1987) call this the mood congruency-accessibility hypothesis: The ad context makes a certain mood or affect more accessible and relieves the processing of stimuli with similar moods or affects. Second, the media source can influence perceptions of the advertised brand (e.g., Assmus 1978; Fuchs 1964). Fuchs (1964) found that a magazine's high prestige "rubbed off" on the advertised brand, finding support for what he called the congruity principle: The medium and the advertised brand converge and become more similar in consumers' minds. Similar results have been found in the research on product endorsers and match-up effects (e.g., Kamins 1990; Solomon, Ashmore, and Longo 1992; Till and Busler 2000). The endorser functions as an information source (similar to a media source), and by way of associative learning, associations are transferred to the brand (Till and Busler 2000).

Third, the media source may function as a cognitive prime, influencing the interpretation of the ad (Yi 1990a, 1990b, 1993). For instance, a print ad promoting a large car may be interpreted such that the car is perceived as safe when the context is an editorial article about safety, or as fuel-thirsty when the context is an editorial article about oil (Yi 1990a). A cognitive prime activates a semantic network of related material that guides attention and determines the interpretation of the ad (Schmitt 1994; Yi 1990b). The prime increases the accessibility of certain (primed) attributes in information processing (Yi 1990a). This tends to move the evaluation of the advertised product toward the priming contextual cue, a phenomenon called assimilation (Maher and Hu 2002). For example, Herr (1989) found that priming of a certain price category of cars affected participants' price judgments of subsequent cars so that they were perceived to be in the same price range. In another study, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) found that participants rated a restaurant as elegant when primed with the information that the previous restaurant at the same location had been elegant, and as casual when primed that the previous restaurant had been casual.

The author hypothesizes that creative media choice will prime the perception of the advertised brand such that it is assimilated with the medium. Assimilation occurs when there is an overlap between the target and the contextual cue, as in the car example above (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993). When exposed to a brand logo and slogan, without an explicit ad message, consumers are faced with an ambiguous stimulus leading them to use the knowledge structures that are activated by the medium to assimilate the brand with the medium based on overlapping associations (Schmitt 1994). These brand associations will be perceived more strongly than when the brand logo and slogan are exposed in a traditional medium (e.g., a newspaper), as a traditional medium is less distinctive and therefore a less potent prime for specific brand associations (Sparkman and Locander 1980). Based on the premise that the creative media choice provides a context that is congruent with the brand, in that it evokes the desired relevant and salient brand associations (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993), the target brand associations are expected to be perceived more strongly in a creative media choice than in a traditional medium.

H1: Target brand associations are perceived more strongly when the brand is advertised in a congruent creative media choice setting than when it is advertised in a traditional medium.

A creative media choice may also enhance ad credibility. First, it communicates the message indirectly by way of priming. Several studies have shown that participants are not consciously aware of the priming and assimilation (Herr 1989; Schmitt 1994; Strahan, Spencer, and Zanna 2002). The contextual cue serves as an implicit frame of reference, guiding which attributes are focused on, as well as how they are perceived (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Schmitt 1994). Consumers are therefore less likely to display resistance to its influence (Herr 1989). Continuing along this line, Yi (1990b) suggests that priming has an advantage over directly communicating a message in an ad because an indirect approach can generate fewer unfavorable cognitive responses.

Second, advertising in general is subject to a schema-based suspicion (Hoch 2002; Stafford and Stafford 2002). Consumers expect the ad to look a certain way and to "sell in" the brand and its features (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995; Goodstein 1993). Hence, consumers are automatically somewhat skeptical toward advertising (Friestad and Wright 1995). Implicitly communicating the message through priming breaks the mold for advertising. Thus, consumers' ad schemata are challenged, resulting in increased interest, and possibly enhanced brand evaluations (Goodstein 1993; Stafford and Stafford 2002).

In this light, it is hypothesized that ad credibility will be greater when the brand is advertised in a congruent creative media choice setting. A congruent creative media choice means that the brand logo and slogan are exposed, and relevant and

desirable brand associations are implicitly communicated through the medium by way of priming and assimilation. A semantic network, or knowledge structure, is activated, which leads consumers to draw their own conclusions (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993). Learning information from one's own conclusions does not arouse the same disbelief as explicit advertising (Hoch 2002).

H2: Ad credibility is greater when the brand is advertised in a congruent creative media choice setting than when the brand is advertised in a traditional medium.

Research on media-source effects has provided ample evidence that a congruent media context (which is a potential advantage in creative media choice) enhances ad and brand evaluations (e.g., Coulter 1998; De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert 2002; Goldberg and Gorn 1987). According to the match-up hypothesis, a congruent media source presents a good "gestalt" for the ad, which provides a coherent message (Solomon, Ashmore, and Longo 1992). The coherent message facilitates the processing of the ad (e.g., Kamins 1991; Lord, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2001), and the medium also works as a source of information in evaluating the advertised brand (cf. Fuchs 1964; Kamins 1990). Consumers' ease and confidence in their evaluations of the ad and the brand increase when the information in the medium and the ad is congruent (Campbell and Goodstein 2001; Goodstein 1993), resulting in more favorable evaluations (Maoz and Tybout 2002; Sengupta 1997).

Heckler and Childers (1992) suggest that congruence can be analyzed in two main dimensions: relevancy and expectancy. They find that relevancy (i.e., whether the ad information contributes to identification and understanding of a primary communicated message) facilitates ad processing, whereas expectancy (i.e., whether the ad information fits with existing mental structures) may reduce ad processing. Applied to media-source effects, one would expect a relevant media context to enhance ad and brand evaluations, as it activates existing cognitive structures relating the media to the brand and enhances consumers' understanding of the ad message. Similarly, an unexpected media context could also produce positive evaluations, as it stimulates processing and formulation of new mental linkages to the brand. In a study of product placements in television shows, Russell (2002) found that plot-congruent placements yielded more positive brand evaluations, as they were perceived to be more relevant. Advertising research has also shown that unexpected advertising elements that surprise consumers have a positive effect on ad and brand attitudes (cf. Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000).

Drawing on the match-up hypothesis, one could argue that ad and brand evaluations should benefit from the congruence in associations between the creative media choice and the advertised brand. As consumers assimilate the brand with the

medium based on the target brand associations primed by the medium, they should feel confident in their evaluations of the ad and the brand. Drawing on Heckler and Childers (1992), one could argue that ad and brand evaluations should benefit from the relevancy and unexpectedness of the congruent creative media choice. Based on the premise that the creative media choice evokes desired relevant and salient brand associations, the overlap in associations between the medium and the brand should make the ad placement appear relevant. Moreover, the creative media choice could be expected to present an element of surprise, as brands are not normally advertised on, for example, banana peels or doorknobs. A traditional medium, in comparison, is not very distinctive (Sparkman and Locander 1980), due to the presence of a large array of advertisers, and the ad placement is not likely to be perceived as either especially relevant or surprising.

H3a: Ad attitude is more positive when the brand is advertised in a congruent creative media choice setting than when it is advertised in a traditional medium.

H3b: Brand attitude is more positive when the brand is advertised in a congruent creative media choice setting than when it is advertised in a traditional medium.

METHOD

The hypotheses were tested in an experiment in which participants were exposed to advertising (in the form of a brand logo and slogan) and asked to indicate their reactions to the advertisement and brand. The study manipulated the medium in which the ad was placed in order to investigate the effects of the ad context.

Stimulus Development

Two products were chosen for the study: an insurance company and an energy drink. The aim was to select two characteristically different products with which people have established and similar associations. The basic criteria for the creative media choice were that an overlap in associations should exist between the medium and the product, and that the placement of the ad in the medium should be perceived as relevant. An egg was considered suitable for the insurance company ad, given its protective shell and that it is fragile and easily breakable. An elevator was thought appropriate for the energy drink, as it is powerful, moves quickly and brings to mind the energy one needs to move at this pace (up or down the stairs).

Associations with the selected media were elicited by 11 target participants using free association and nonprompted replies ("What associations come to mind when you think of an egg/elevator panel?"). In a similar fashion, associations with

the two products were elicited by 12 target participants ("What associations come to mind when you think of insurance/energy drinks?"). All associations were listed, and the lists were later matched between the media and the products to find overlapping target associations. This procedure was employed to find the associations that would be most relevant and salient in an ad exposure situation. Research has shown that consumers' perceptions of ambiguous stimuli are affected by the associations that are most relevant and salient (cf. Bridges, Keller, and Sood 2000). The relevance and salience of associations are determined by the schema that consumers use (Lane 2000), which, in the present case, would be the product category schema. Hence, the aim was to find the associations that would likely come to mind when the products were exposed in the chosen media. Six associations were found to overlap for the insurance company and the egg (protection, health, life, necessary, home, and practical), and seven for the energy drink and the elevator (helpful, uplifting, powerful, tired, easy, fast, and work).

Twenty-three new subjects participated in a pretest measuring the relevance and salience of the overlapping associations. The questions were worded as follows: "Imagine that an insurance company (energy drink) is advertised on an egg (elevator). What associations come to mind?" The participants rated each association on a scale from 1 (very weak) to 7 (very strong). The three highest-rated associations (all means > 5) for each medium were chosen: "protection," "necessary," and "practical" for the egg, and "uplifting," "powerful," and "fast" for the elevator. In addition, the author selected an association relating to the creative aspect of the media choice. One could expect that an ad placed in these specific media would signal a creative brand, which could be considered a positive brand association. "Creative" was chosen as the association for the insurance company, and "cool" as the association for the energy drink. "Creative" seems intuitive as a desirable brand association for an insurance company, which needs, for example, to come up with creative solutions, but is less suitable for an energy drink. On the other hand, "cool" seems intuitive as a desirable brand association for an energy drink in that it would be a cool thing to drink, but it is not as fitting for an insurance company.

Finally, 30 participants rated the congruence between the media and the products using Lange, Selander, and Åberg's (2003) two-item, seven-point fit scale (matches/does not match, fits well/does not fit well). The fit between the egg and the insurance company, and the elevator and the energy drink yielded a mean value of 5.8 and 5.9, respectively. Thus, it was concluded that the ad placement would be perceived as relevant.

The products were given fictitious brand names and slogans to reduce any confounding due to the participants' familiarity with the test brands (cf. Yi 1990a). The insurance company was called "Safer Insurance," and its slogan was "Pro-

TECTS YOU." The energy drink was called "Kick Energy Drink," with the slogan "Get a kick." These names were chosen to signal the product category (cf. Robertson 1987). The insurance company's name and slogan were printed on the shell of an egg that was placed in an open, ordinary egg carton. The brand name and slogan of the energy drink were printed on a sticker that was posted between the "up" and "down" buttons on an elevator panel (at the top of the panel it said "Elevator"). Both creative media choices were photographed.

Two additional versions were designed to reduce the potential confound of novelty (i.e., effects of simply exposing the brands in an unusual setting). The creative media choice was rotated so that the brand name and slogan of the insurance company appeared on the elevator panel, and the energy drink's brand name and slogan appeared on the eggshell. This enabled tests of congruent creative media choice as well as incongruent creative media choice. A pretest with 20 participants confirmed that the rotated creative media choices were incongruent with the products (mean values on the fit scale were $M = 2.7$ for the insurance company and $M = 2.5$ for the energy drink) and the six selected brand associations (all means < 4).

Finally, a newspaper was chosen as the traditional medium. Ads containing the two products' names and slogans were inserted in a page. The test ad was the only ad on the page, placed at the bottom left of the page (where ads are usually placed in the newspaper), and the page header was removed. The page was photographed (to make it comparable to the photographed egg and elevator panel). In a pretest, 12 target participants rated the fit between the newspaper page and the two advertised products, once again using Lange, Selander, and Åberg's (2003) two-item fit scale (1–7). The mean value was 3.4 for the insurance company, and 3.3 for the energy drink. The mean values were not significantly different from each other, and they were not significantly different from the middle point (4) on the scale, indicating that the newspaper provided a neutral context for these ads.

Procedure

The participants were 589 students majoring in business or science at two large college campuses. They were approached by researchers in (nonmarketing-related) seminars and took part in the experiment during seminar breaks. They were randomly assigned to one of the six cells (insurance company/energy drink, creative media choice/newspaper), making a cell size of approximately 98 participants. The cover story was short, stating only that the researchers were interested in the students' views on marketing. Without further instruction, the questionnaires were handed out. The first page contained one of the photographs below a brief written scenario to simulate a real-life situation (*Imagine that you are about to take the*

elevator. When you reach for the button, this is what you see; Imagine that you are opening a carton of eggs. When it is open, this is what you see; or Imagine that you are reading the newspaper. When you turn the page, this is what you see.). Participants were free to view the photograph for as long (or as briefly) as they liked, just as they would in a real setting. The following page contained filler questions. The participants were told they were not to turn back to the first page and look at the photograph again. An open-ended question about the purpose of the study was included at the end of the questionnaire. Eleven participants explicitly guessed that the study was about ad placement effects and were eliminated from the analyses; the most common answers were "ad execution" and "evaluations of new brands."

Measures

Brand associations were measured using the question "How well can (brand) be described by the following words?" Each association was rated on a seven-point scale (1 = very poorly, 7 = very well). The associations, elicited in the pretests (see above), were "protection," "necessary," "practical," and "creative" for the insurance company, and "uplifting," "powerful," "fast," and "cool" for the energy drink.

Ad credibility was measured with a three-item semantic differential scale (1–7): convincing/unconvincing, believable/unbelievable, and biased/unbiased. They were averaged to produce an index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Ad attitude was measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale consisting of three items: good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, and favorable/unfavorable. An index was produced by averaging the responses to the items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Brand attitude was measured with three items on a seven-point semantic differential scale: good/bad, negative/positive, and satisfactory/unsatisfactory. The averaged index had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

Congruence between the advertised product and the medium was measured with Lange, Selander, and Åberg's (2003) two-item, seven-point fit scale. Mean values of the index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$) differed significantly ($F = 16.98, p < .01$) between all the groups. Congruent creative media choice rated highest on fit ($M = 5.85$), followed by the newspaper ($M = 3.24$), and, finally, the incongruent creative media choice ($M = 2.43$). This confirms the expectation that compared with the traditional medium, there was a greater overlap between the congruent creative media choice and the products, and that the placement in the creative media seemed relevant. Furthermore, the low rating for the rotated, incongruent cre-

ative media choice supports its use for controlling for the confound of novelty.

Hypotheses Tests

Separate MANOVAs (multivariate analysis of variance) were run for the two products on all dependent variables, including brand associations. Media choice had a significant main effect on all dependent variables for both the insurance company, $F(7, 290) = 9.43, p < .01$, Wilks's $\lambda = .84$, and the energy drink, $F(7, 299) = 8.36, p < .01$, Wilks's $\lambda = .87$. Planned comparisons were used to test for differences in effects across the three conditions (see Tables 1 and 2).

Starting with H1, all brand associations for the insurance company had significantly higher mean values in the congruent creative media choice than in the newspaper ad or the incongruent creative media (Table 1). For the energy drink, all brand associations had significantly higher mean values in the congruent creative media choice than in the newspaper ad or the incongruent creative media, except for "cool," where the difference was not significant between the two creative media choices ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.08$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.45$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.76$) (see Table 2). Comparisons between the newspaper ad and the incongruent creative media choice revealed that the newspaper ad either outperformed or was not significantly different from the incongruent creative media choice for both products (except for "creative" for the insurance company, where the incongruent creative media choice scored higher: $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.55$ versus $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 3.10$). The results mainly support H1. The two deviations (no significant difference for "cool" between the creative media choices for the energy drink, and a significantly higher mean value for "creative" for the insurance company in the incongruent creative media choice than in the newspaper) were the nonmedia/brand-specific associations included in the study.

Turning to H2, ad credibility was significantly greater in the congruent creative media choice than in the other two conditions for both the insurance company ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.48$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 3.00$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.88$) and the energy drink ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.34$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.81$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.13$). No significant differences were found between the newspaper ad and the incongruent creative media choice. H2 is therefore supported. The same pattern was found for ad and brand attitudes. Ad attitude was significantly greater in the congruent creative media choice than in the other two conditions for both the insurance company ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.46$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.89$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.95$) and the energy drink ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.48$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.78$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.99$). The results were similar for brand attitude ($M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.75$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 3.26$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 3.23$ for the insurance company and

TABLE I
MANOVA Results for H1-H3, Insurance Company

	Congruent creative media choice (egg)	Newspaper ad	Incongruent creative media choice (elevator)	η squared	Planned comparisons
<i>Brand associations</i>					
Sheltering	4.33	3.75	3.50	.17	$t = 4.01, p < .01^a$ $t = 4.36, p < .01^b$ $t = 1.16, p > .10^c$
Necessary	3.82	3.30	3.16	.15	$t = 3.70, p < .01^a$ $t = 3.87, p < .01^b$ $t = 1.00, p > .10^c$
Practical	3.64	3.14	3.03	.15	$t = 3.72, p < .01^a$ $t = 3.73, p < .01^b$ $t = .76, p > .10^c$
Creative	4.01	2.55	3.10	.20	$t = 6.93, p < .01^a$ $t = 4.54, p < .01^b$ $t = 3.88, p < .01^c$
<i>Ad credibility</i>					
	3.48	3.00	2.88	.13	$t = 2.88, p < .01^a$ $t = 3.00, p < .01^b$ $t = 1.20, p > .10^c$
<i>Ad attitude</i>					
	3.46	2.89	2.95	.13	$t = 2.91, p < .01^a$ $t = 2.80, p < .01^b$ $t = .33, p > .10^c$
<i>Brand attitude</i>					
	3.75	3.26	3.23	.11	$t = 2.87, p < .01^a$ $t = 2.86, p < .01^b$ $t = .21, p > .10^c$

Notes: MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance. $F(7, 290) = 9.43, p < .01$, Wilks's $\lambda = .84$.

^a Congruent creative media choice versus newspaper ad.

^b Congruent creative media choice versus incongruent creative media choice.

^c Newspaper ad versus incongruent creative media choice.

$M_{\text{congruent creative media}} = 3.35$ versus $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 2.76$ and $M_{\text{incongruent creative media}} = 2.80$ for the energy drink). No significant differences were found between the newspaper ad and the incongruent creative media choice in either ad or brand attitude. Thus, H3 is also supported.

To enable a comparison of the results for the two products, a 3×2 MANOVA was run on the three dependent variables, that is, ad credibility, ad attitude, and brand attitude; brand associations were not included, as they differed between the products. Media choice (congruent creative/newspaper/incongruent creative) had a significant main effect on all three dependent variables, as hypothesized, $F(3, 589) = 9.98, p < .01$, Wilks's $\lambda = .87$. Neither the main effect of product (insurance company versus energy drink) nor the interaction effect was significant, $F(3, 589) = 1.12$ and $F(3, 589) = .16$, respectively.

The preceding analyses suggest that congruence moderates the effects of creative media choice. In the theoretical section it was suggested that, in a next step, creative media

choice is likely to be viewed as unexpected and surprising, and that surprise, in its turn, affects ad and brand attitudes positively. Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step procedure was employed to test whether surprise mediates the relation between congruent creative media choice and ad and brand attitudes. Participants rated how surprising they perceived the ad placement to be on a scale of 1-7 (Table 3). First, media choice affected ad attitude ($p < .01$) and brand attitude ($p < .01$) in separate regressions. Second, media choice also affected surprise ($p < .01$). Third, ad and brand attitude were regressed against surprise, which had a significant effect in both regressions ($p < .01$). Finally, when both media choice and surprise were included in the regressions, the squared partial correlations (i.e., the squared β coefficients) indicating the effects of creative media choice on ad and brand attitudes dropped by 90% (insurance company) and 74% (energy drink) in the case of ad attitude, and by 95% (insurance company) and 80% (energy drink) in the

TABLE 2
MANOVA Results for H1-H3, Energy Drink

	Congruent creative media choice (egg)	Newspaper ad	Incongruent creative media choice (elevator)	η squared	Planned comparisons
<i>Brand associations</i>					
Uplifting	4.00	3.52	3.02	.14	$t = 3.41, p < .01^a$ $t = 4.99, p < .01^b$ $t = 3.50, p < .01^c$
Powerful	4.42	3.55	3.00	.21	$t = 5.42, p < .01^a$ $t = 5.56, p < .01^b$ $t = 3.36, p < .01^c$
Fast	4.55	4.16	3.59	.15	$t = 3.40, p < .01^a$ $t = 5.01, p < .01^b$ $t = 2.89, p < .01^c$
Cool	3.08	2.45	2.76	.16	$t = 3.54, p < .01^a$ $t = 1.12, p > .10^b$ $t = 1.15, p > .10^c$
<i>Ad credibility</i>					
	3.34	2.81	2.13	.11	$t = 2.76, p < .01^a$ $t = 5.66, p < .01^b$ $t = 4.40, p < .01^c$
<i>Ad attitude</i>					
	3.48	2.78	2.99	.15	$t = 3.53, p < .01^a$ $t = 2.89, p < .01^b$ $t = 1.00, p > .10^c$
<i>Brand attitude</i>					
	3.35	2.76	2.80	.11	$t = 3.29, p < .01^a$ $t = 3.20, p < .01^b$ $t = .11, p > .10^c$

Notes: MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance. $F(7, 299) = 8.36, p < .01$, Wilks's $\lambda = .87$.

^a = Congruent creative media choice versus newspaper ad.

^b = Congruent creative media choice versus incongruent creative media choice.

^c = Newspaper ad versus incongruent creative media choice.

case of brand attitude. The results suggest that surprise may mediate the positive effect of creative media choice on ad and brand attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the theory on media-context effects in several ways. First, it extends the research field empirically. Virtually all studies of media context have examined print, television, or radio. This study investigates creative media choice, that is, creative choices of new and unexploited media, which is gaining in importance in advertising campaigns (cf. Karo 2002). Second, the study does not focus on the immediate editorial context, but rather on the total media context, which to date has been the subject of little research, and which may also be of greater practical importance (Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002). Third, it extends Yi's (1990a, 1990b, 1993) research on cognitive-

priming effects, and investigates not only how media context can influence the perception of the message communicated in the ad, but also how it can implicitly communicate target brand associations in its own right. The present study suggests that using the medium as a visual prime could affect perceived brand associations, enhance ad credibility, and have positive effects on ad and brand attitude. Consumers faced with an ambiguous ad assimilate the exposed brand with the medium and reach their own conclusions. This seems to have a greater persuasive effect than an ad explicitly communicating the target brand associations.

Media-Source Effects

The results of the present study support previous research on media-source effects. The medium may in fact *be* the message. For this to occur, however, the brand and the medium must match. A congruent creative media choice enhances

TABLE 3
Regression Coefficients, Test of Mediation

Variable	Standardized β coefficient	t statistic	Significance value
Insurance company			
<i>Ad attitude</i>			
Media choice (before inclusion of surprise)	.54	2.98	$p < .01$
Media choice (after inclusion of surprise)	.17	1.67	$p < .10$
Surprise	.41	4.89	$p < .01$
<i>Brand attitude</i>			
Media choice (before inclusion of surprise)	.45	2.77	$p < .01$
Media choice (after inclusion of surprise)	.10	1.01	$p > .10$
Surprise	.33	2.01	$p < .01$
Energy drink			
<i>Ad attitude</i>			
Media choice (before inclusion of surprise)	.68	3.61	$p < .01$
Media choice (after inclusion of surprise)	.35	1.96	$p < .05$
Surprise	.38	3.66	$p < .01$
<i>Brand attitude</i>			
Media choice (before inclusion of surprise)	.56	3.29	$p < .01$
Media choice (after inclusion of surprise)	.25	1.65	$p < .10$
Surprise	.40	4.14	$p < .01$

brand associations and ad and brand evaluations, whereas an incongruent creative media choice does not. This extends previous research on match-up effects, which has mainly focused on endorser characteristics (portrayed *within* an ad) such as beauty and expertise. In the case of creative media choice, match-up effects appear to exist between the media source and the brand in the form of various brand-related associations. Paraphrasing Solomon, Ashmore, and Longo (1992), the media source constitutes a gestalt *surrounding* the ad, thus providing a coherent message for certain desired associations that are enhanced in the communication.

The present study adds an interesting twist to this by presenting the view that the positive effect of creative media choice on ad and brand attitudes may be mediated by surprise. Surprise has previously been shown to be an outcome of incongruity (cf. Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000). The results reported here suggest that creative media choice may be most effective when it is *both* surprising and perceived as being congruent. Congruence and surprise would exist at two different levels, however. The ad placement is congruent with respect to the associations shared by the medium and the brand. Hence, congruence exists at the brand level. The media choice, however, is surprising and challenges consumers' ad schema; thus, surprise exists at the ad level. The strength of a creative media choice, therefore, could be its ability to be simultaneously surprising and relevant, tying in with Heckler and Childers' (1992) work on expectancy and relevancy in advertising.

The joint existence of congruence and surprise can also be discussed in terms of typicality. Creative media choice may break the mold for what advertising typically looks like. This could have negative effects on evaluations if the advertising is perceived to be incongruent with an established product-category advertising schema (Campbell and Goodstein 2001; Goodstein 1993). However, a creative media choice may be atypical of advertising in general (and consumers' perceptions of advertising as persuasion; cf. Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995), whereas the ad placement still seems relevant, and evokes brand associations that are typical of the product category.

Managerial Implications

The present study suggests that advertisers could benefit from using new and unexploited media. Relevant ad placement may have positive effects on brand communication, and on ad and brand evaluations. When looking for a suitable medium, one needs to take the following three factors into consideration. First, the medium must prime consumers to make the target brand associations. Second, undesirable priming effects must be ruled out. For example, advertising courier services on watches could evoke associations such as "steady as clockwork," but it could also evoke stress or associations such as "it's slow." Third, the connection between the medium and the advertised product should be easy to comprehend.

A creative media choice does not necessarily mean adver-

tising in an extreme setting, such as on an egg. Rather, the main aim of this study is to suggest that thinking creatively in the media selection process may be highly beneficial, whatever the medium. By using the medium as a prime, and making an ad placement that is perceived as relevant, yet unexpected and surprising, the advertiser can make brand communication more powerful and credible, while enhancing ad and brand evaluations. This can be done in a traditional medium, but the advantage of using a new and unexploited medium is that competition with other advertisers is reduced, and the medium becomes a more distinctive source of communication (Burke and Srull 1988; Sparkman and Locander 1980).

Limitations and Further Research

A weakness of the method employed in this study is the use of photographs rather than real media. Photographs were used to simulate a real setting in the experimental condition (e.g., rather than placing a real elevator panel in the participants' hands, they were shown a photo of a panel outside of a real elevator and given a scenario asking them to think of a real-life encounter). A field experiment would obviously provide a more realistic test, however, incorporating variables such as attention, social influence, and interference. In addition, a field experiment would reduce the risk of demand effects and increase the external validity of this study's findings.

The study employed two unusual media for two specific products. Although it is argued above that tests in these two unusual media mainly serve to emphasize the benefits of thinking creatively in terms of traditional as well as nontraditional media, it is important to note that for many advertisers, eggs and elevator panels might not be a realistic choice. Future studies of less extreme media, which test, for example, new creative placements in traditional media, would further our understanding of the effects of creative media choice.

When interpreting the results of this study, it is important to note that congruence and surprise were measured with participants' self-report measures; their mental processes were never actually tested. The analysis is exploratory, and suggests that these variables may be important in explaining the effects of creative media choice. To learn more about congruence and surprise and to ascertain their effects, it would be preferable to use, for example, cognitive-response measures. Finally, the discussion introduced the difference between general advertising typicality and a product-category advertising schema. The present study investigated the consequences of challenging consumers' perceptions of advertising in general (as suggested by, e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995), while still adhering to the product-category schema (by communicating expected and relevant brand associations). Future studies should investigate the differential effects of challenging schemata at both levels.

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